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REPRODUCTIONS OF THE DRAWINGS OF

SEURAT

ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN 1946

Introduction

GEORGES SEURAT was born at Paris in 1859. He worked at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts where his master Lehmann was a pupil of Ingres, the distinguished painter and leader of the classical school. Lehmann was a bitter opponent equally of the romantic school, who took their subjects from medieval romance and history rather than from Greek and Roman mythology and history, and of the contemporary new school, known as the Impressionists, who found their inspiration in the everyday life and scene. Seurat, without being won over to these antagonisms, did acquire from this teacher a passionate interest in classical composition which remained with him all his life. He was naturally studious and spent much of his time in libraries and museums, where he made many copies from old masters and from the works of Ingres. Whilst wishing to learn all he could from the great traditions of the past in art, he was keenly interested in the scientific discoveries of his time, which led him to the study of new theories of colour. These in their turn brought him under the domination of Delacroix, the leader of the Romantics, the rival of Ingres and the most potent force in French art of the latter half of the 19th century. Amongst those influenced by Delacroix were the Impressionists. To express light in terms of colour was the chief aim of these painters; Seurat shared their interests and made use of their technical developments, but there his indebtedness ceased. The contemporary painter who had the greatest influence on the young artist was Puvis de Chavannes. Puvis set out to restore the unity of architecture and painting, which was lost when artists began painting "easel" pictures, and devoted much of his time to mural painting. Superficially there is a resemblance between Seurat's work and that of Puvis. Both produced large compositions built up on an architectural framework, but Puvis's composition lacks vitality, his work has a

strong literary flavour, and he was not in the same class as a painter.

From his long and intensive studies Seurat developed a rigid self discipline. Pictures were to be carefully and elaborately built up from long study of one's subject, not as the Impressionists were doing who painted their pictures on the spot. Whilst observation of nature must be the basis of creative work, scientific principles of form and colour were needed so as to blend these observations in the final painting. Seurat's method would stifle originality in many artists, but he found he needed a constraint; freedom to him only came when working within a rigid scheme. Certainly this discipline enabled him to produce moving and magnificent paintings. Though it might not be expected, the work of those painters who have a somewhat scientific approach to their art often possesses a lyrical charm. The poetical, almost musical quality of Seurat's painting reminds us of the work of Italian artists such as Ucello and Piero della Francesca, who also found inspiration in a mathematical basis to composition and in the newly-discovered theory of perspective. The dangers of so doctrinaire an approach became noticeable however in his later pictures, and it shows signs of becoming a drag rather than a creative force. In his immediate followers it quickly descended to a deadening formula. It was in this discipline, however, that lay the originality and challenge of Seurat's work to his age. He and Cézanne were the chief painters who reacted to the dangers of impressionism, its absorption in light to the detriment of form and constructive solidity, and its realism which tended to see only the outward appearance of an object or scene and miss its deeper significance. He himself was reserved in character and manner and was not by nature made to be a revolutionary figure; he was however accepted as the leader by a small band of painters, including some much older than himself such as Pissarro, and with some of them he founded in 1884 the *Salon des Indépendants*, to which he devoted much of his energies.

Van Gogh, Gauguin and Toulouse Lautrec, all older men than Seurat, joined with him in restoring a deeper and wider scope to art. Van Gogh with his dynamic vitality expressed the violent force and movement which underlies nature. Gauguin pursuing the original simplicity of primitive art went to the South Seas to

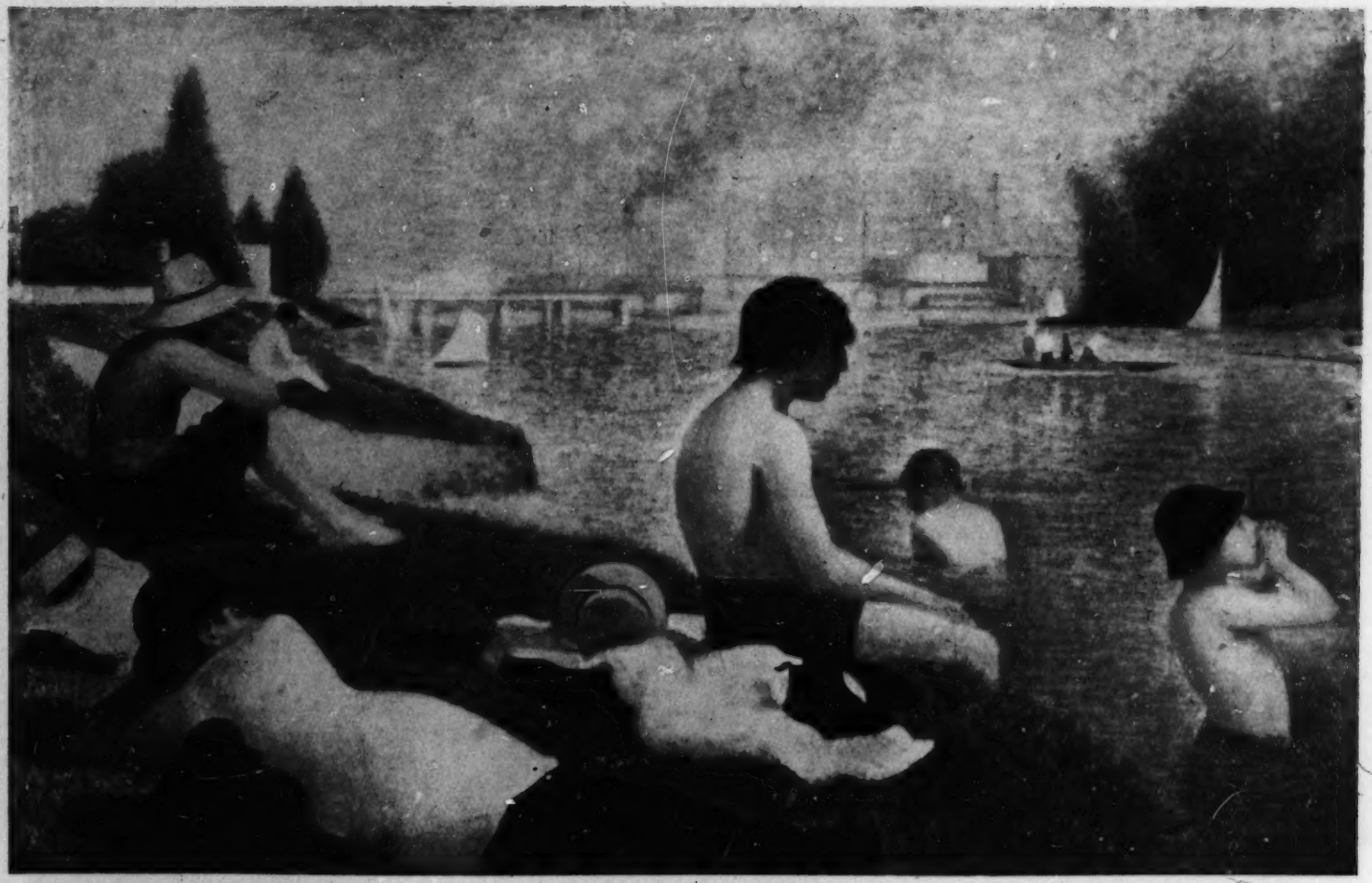
fly from civilization. Toulouse Lautrec expressed an aristocrat's cynicism and satire in subjects chosen from Parisian night life. Seurat never spared himself in the hard work entailed in his large pictures and painting as he did by theory, he worked late into the night. He died suddenly of an infection in 1891 at the age of 32, probably weakened from overwork.

Seurat's work is known chiefly by six large paintings. He, as did the Impressionists, chose his subjects from contemporary life, but unlike them, it was human life in which he was primarily interested, and not in the play of light upon a scene, the capture of a transitory effect in either a landscape or social gathering. The scene as depicted by Seurat is not an attempt to represent the rapid glance of an onlooker but an artificial and deeply calculated re-creation: a composition built up on severely simple lines, such as triangles, diagonals, the evenly spaced repetition of uprights and so on. He had learnt, however, from the Impressionists to envelop his figures in light and had even gone farther than they did by making a scientific formula of the lighting.

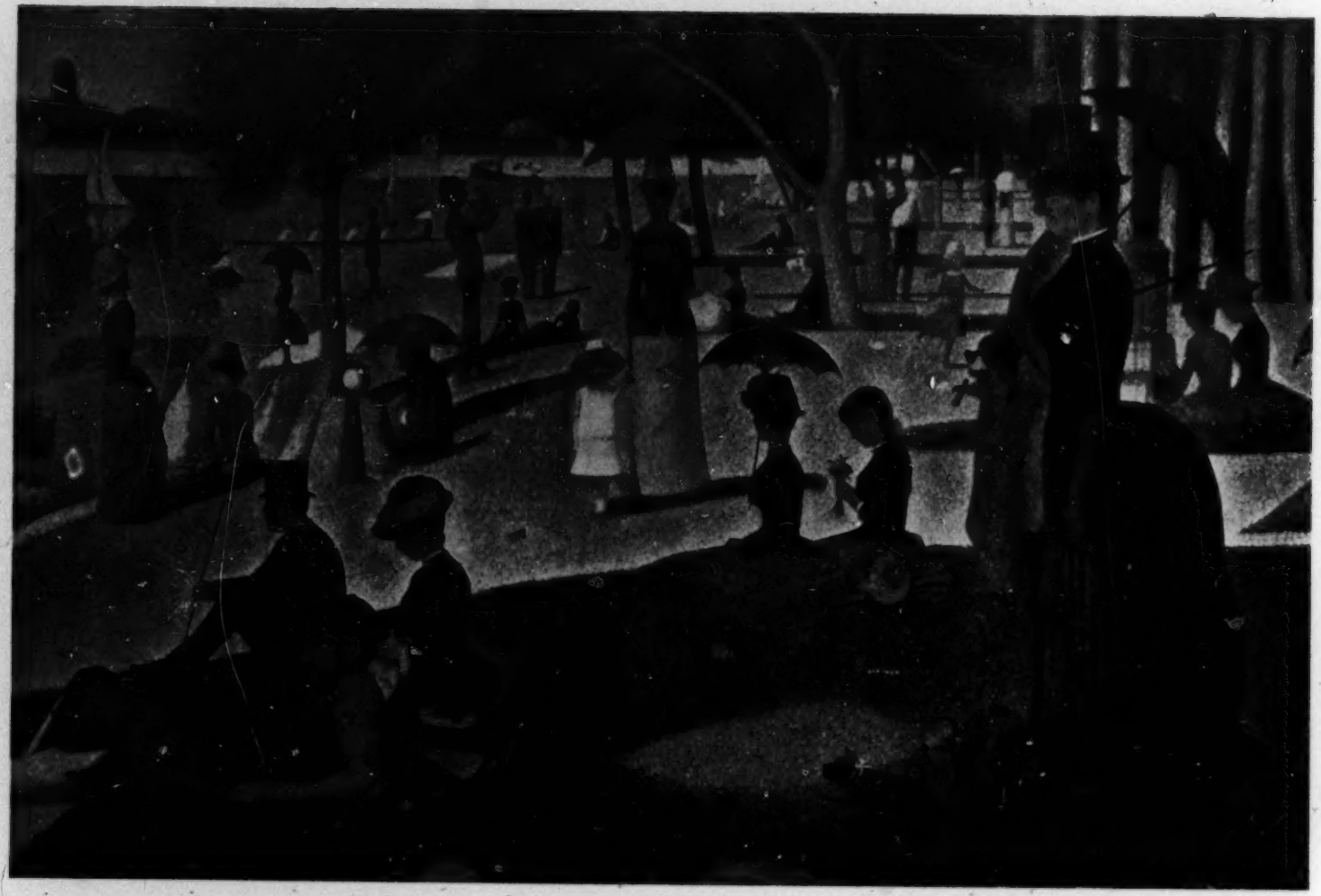
His first two large paintings were of river scenes outside Paris, *Une Baignade, Asnières* (1883-4) (Plate I) and *Le Dimanche d'été à la Grand Jatte* (1884-86) (Plate II). *Une Baignade* is in the Tate Gallery and is the masterpiece of its 19th and 20th century French collection. It depicts a party of men sitting on the river bank or bathing, with a railway bridge and factories in the background. The peculiar beauty of nature on the confines of a great city is here wonderfully captured. On a hot summer day, a languorous group rest on the fresh grass or enjoy the coolness of the water; not a stir nor a movement and the silence is only broken by the call of one of the boys in the water to someone outside the picture. His next painting was of a favourite summer resort of Paris, *L'Ile de la Grande Jatte*. This is a more ambitious work than the last. He has given up the simple planes of the first picture for a far more elaborate composition worked out in much greater depth. The scene is set in the hotter sun and deeper shadows of a summer afternoon, and a variety of people sit or walk about enjoying their Sunday rest. The picture is now at the Chicago Art Institute. Artificial lighting absorbed Seurat's attention in his remaining big paintings with the exception of *Les Poseuses*. *La Parade* (1887-88) (Plate III) is probably the most

austere of all Seurat's work. With many other artists he went often to the Paris fairs to seek material. His subject is the parade of the circus troop outside the tent, seen in the magic glare of gaslight on a dark night. The lamps shine with varying intensity on a succession of figures spaced out, and the picture is slightly reminiscent of the severe simplicity of a Byzantine mosaic. In *Les Poseuses* (1887-88) the artist has placed his nude models in the top lighting of a studio, contrasting their simple monumental forms with the painted shapes of one of his pictures on the wall, and the dignity of the human figure with the grotesqueness of women's fashions in his day. Seurat's last two larger paintings *Le Chahut* (1889-90) and *Le Cirque* (1890-91) (Plate IV) are again circus scenes. Here for the first time the artist has expressed movement. Up to now he has been solely absorbed in the power of the human figure in repose. Whilst retaining his severely formalized shapes and lines, Seurat in *Le Chahut* makes his picture out of the rhythmic movement of dancers. But here formalization and movement have not been happily blended, and there is also a certain pettiness about the detail. In *Le Cirque*, however, the symbolization of the graceful movement of the performers is brilliantly achieved, making a pattern full of vitality against the rows of immobile spectators behind. Seurat made many small paintings and sketches in preparation for these large works, and he also produced a number of smaller pictures of subjects chosen either in the neighbourhood of Paris or on the north-west coast of France, harbour scenes, seascapes and studies of the coast line.

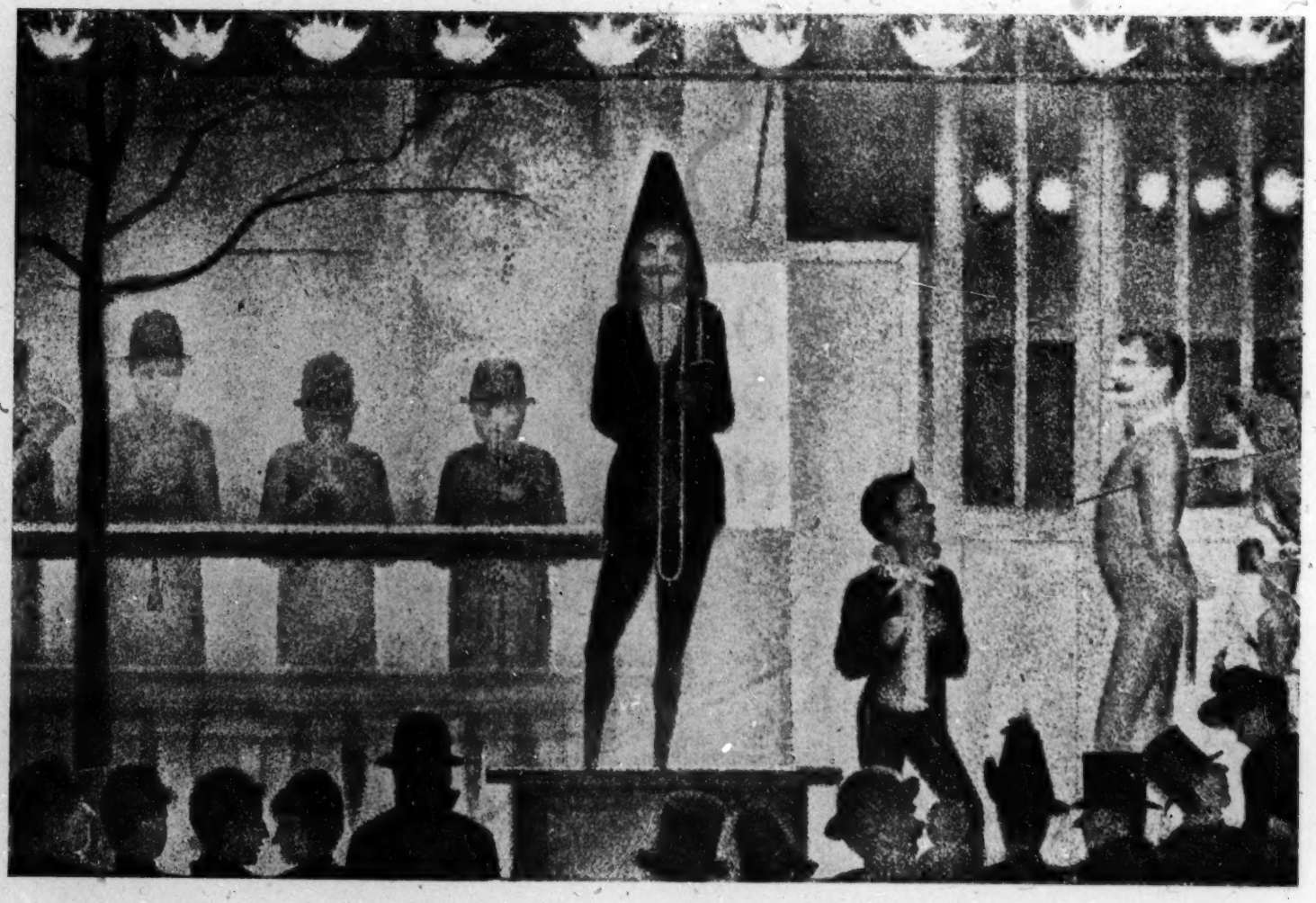
Much has been written about Seurat's painting technique. In order to keep his colours clear and fresh, and to achieve the maximum vibration, pure colour was juxtaposed in small dots. The brightness of two or more oil colours will tend to be diminished when they are mixed on the palette, owing to the colour of the oil itself. This method was known as "divisionnisme" or "pointillisme". The onlooker looking at the different colours at a distance will tend to blend them for himself. This technique was not new, all great colourists have used it at times. Amongst Frenchmen Watteau was probably the earliest to employ it, so did Delacroix, whilst Renoir, only slightly Seurat's senior, used it more than ever before. Seurat was the first however to turn it



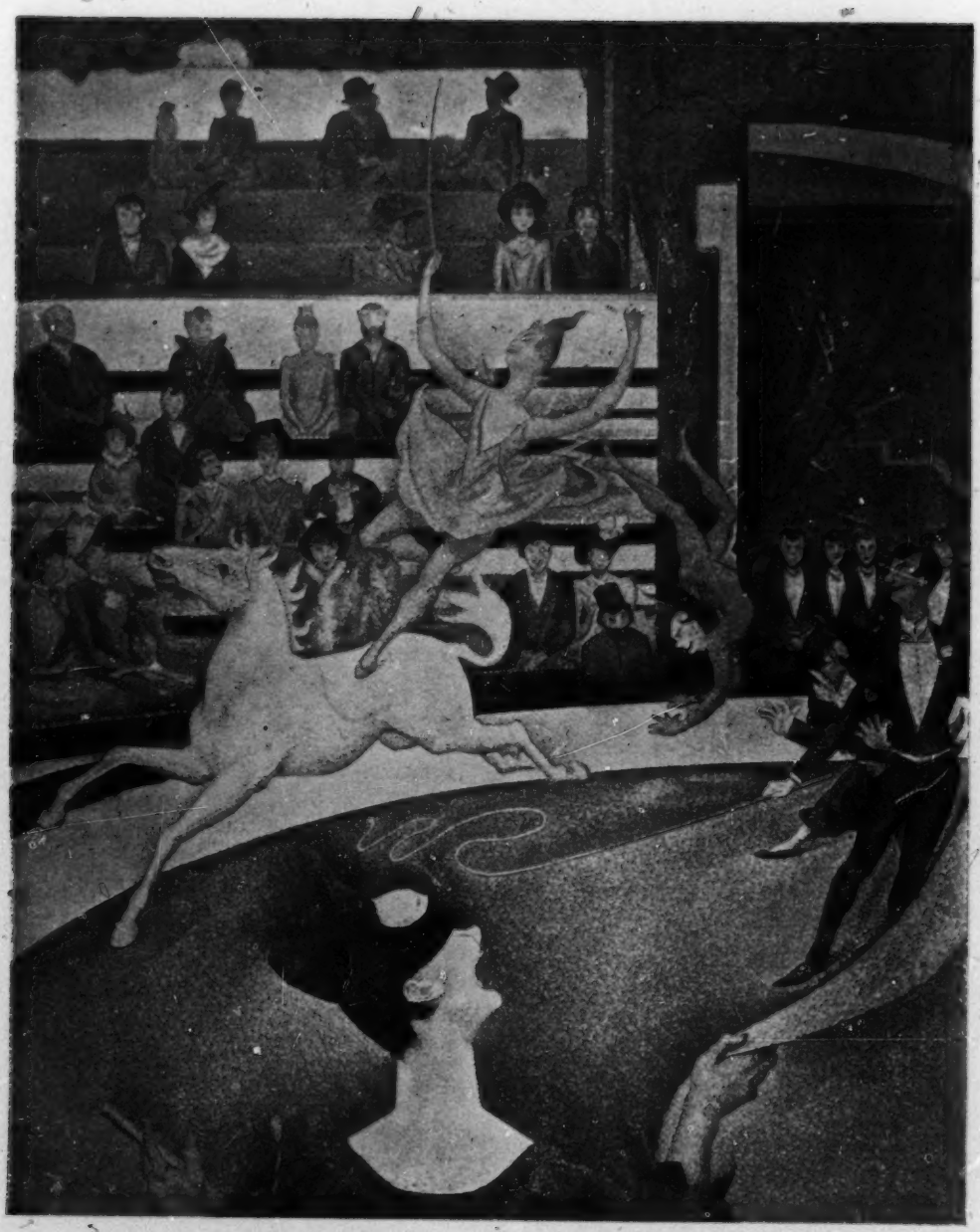
I. UNE BAIGNADE, ASNIERES (*Tate Gallery, London*)



II. LE DIMANCHE D'ETE A LA GRANDE JATTE (*Chicago Art Institute*)



III. LA PARADE (*photograph by courtesy of the Lefèvre Gallery, London*)



IV. LE CIRQUE (*The Louvre, Paris*)

into a system, and he developed it from his study of scientific works on colour. With Seurat the technique was used with subtlety and variety; at least, at first. In *Une Baignade* it only appears here and there. In his later pictures it does tend to become mechanical, but with Seurat's followers the method becomes a fearful bore. "Divisionnisme" as a living force died with its creator.

This selection of reproductions of Seurat's drawings has been made from his work at different periods of his life, though it is difficult to date most of the drawings. For over two years at the beginning of his career, Seurat devoted himself entirely to drawing and some of the earlier work shown here probably belongs to this period. Some of the drawings are preparatory studies for paintings, others may have been ideas for pictures that were never carried out, but most of them are clearly drawings made for the love of drawing.

With all great artists drawing and painting become more and more closely related. Seurat's drawings are essentially a painter's drawings; in the same category as those of Titian, rather than those of a Florentine artist. The subjects are all selected from everyday life; his own circle, his father and mother, his friend and only outstanding follower, Signac; work people; Paris and the suburbs; passers by in the streets and lastly the fair and the circus. Some of his earliest drawings show an interest in compositions on classical subjects but these were school studies and he quickly discarded such subjects for contemporary life. At first in his drawings there is a search for line, which led him to the study of Holbein (No. 3). There is a transitional period when along with the lines the volumes were blocked out in simple shading (No. 50). Soon, however, the predominance of a painter's problem shows itself in the drawings. Line is abandoned for simple tones and volumes, and drawing becomes primarily a study in tone, carried out in cross hatching and without a contour. Both in his figures and in his landscapes he discards all irrelevant detail and concentrates on a few simple shapes. The lighting, whether natural or artificial comes from one source, or two at the most; he was never seduced by the intricacies and subtleties of lighting which had excited Manet in his *Bar at the Folies Bergères*. His landscapes

are simply massed against a luminous sky, whilst his figures are either silhouetted or gleam out of the surrounding darkness. He made full use of the possibilities of colour which could be obtained from the greys and blacks of pencil and charcoal. As in his paintings, there is little movement in the drawings. Not only are the figures still but there is no attempt to represent the movement of planes, which is generally the draughtsman's chief preoccupation. In fact, Seurat's drawings approximate more closely to paintings in quality than those of other artists. We can understand from them what Seurat meant when he described painting as "the art of hollowing out a surface". With Whistler he shared a love of the mystery of the half light of dusk. But underlying the softness and magic of his nocturnes is a severe stylization and search for contour which saves them from any woolliness. Whilst the first effect of his drawings may be the charm of imprecise half tones, their deeper beauty lies in the subtle simplification of the forms and in the meditated calculation of the spacing.

GABRIEL WHITE

Reproductions

1. THE DINER, *Seurat's Father*
2. WOMAN READING
3. MAN'S HEAD, *after Holbein*
4. PAUL SIGNAC *about* 1889
5. SEURAT'S MOTHER
6. A WOMAN SEWING
7. A LEG—study for *Une Baignade, Asnières*
8. STUDY for *Une Baignade, Asnières*
9. STUDY for *Un Dimanche d'été à la Grande Jatte*
10. WOMAN SITTING ON THE GROUND—study for *Un Dimanche d'été à la Grande Jatte*
11. WOMEN—study for *Un Dimanche d'été à la Grande Jatte*
12. FIVE MONKEYS—study for *Un Dimanche d'été à la Grande Jatte*
13. THE MODEL—study for *Les Poseuses*
14. WOMAN'S HAT AND UMBRELLA—study for *Les Poseuses*
15. STUDY OF DRAPERY 1877
16. PLACE DE LA CONCORDE IN WINTER
17. THE CHANNEL AT GRAVELINES 1890
18. CORNER OF THE FACTORY
19. THE GRASS BANK
20. TRUNK OF A TREE
21. THE TREE
22. HORSE AND CART
23. A MONKEY
24. THE WHITE HORSE
25. THE NAP
26. BALLET GIRL IN A WHITE HAT
27. THE RED CLOWN
28. A MARKET PORTER
29. IN THE DUSK

30. PASSERS BY
31. CLOWNS DANCING
32. WOMAN CARRYING A BUNDLE
33. THE SWEEPER
34. WOMAN LIFTING HER SKIRT
35. WOMAN IN BLACK
36. THE PENSIONER
37. "LA CANNE ET LE COCHONNET"
38. DANCERS TAKING A CALL
39. ON THE BALCONY
40. DANCER WITH A STICK
41. SILHOUETTE
42. A PROCURESS
43. MOUNTEBANKS
44. A MARKET PORTER
45. A REAPER
46. WASHING ON A LINE
47. PAINTER AT WORK
48. THE LITTLE VEIL
49. A GROUP
50. FOUR SKETCHES

The reproductions shown in this exhibition are taken from the two volumes entitled "Les dessins de Georges Seurat (1859-1891)" issued by Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1928

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